A PACKET COMMUNICATION SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE FOR LOCAL NETWORKING

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ABSTRACT: A packet network architecture for local networking is described. Network nodes (computers, terminals) are connected to coaxial cables, each of which provides a broadcast subnetwork. Subnetworks are interconnected by packet repeaters that serve as switching nodes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The interconnection of computing facilities within a local environment, such as a single building or a cluster of buildings, without the use of common-carrier transmission facilities, is fast becoming an important problem. When the local network distances exceed those of computer system busses (about 100 m), the need for packet communication functions such as those used for remote networking [1] arises. Transmission media that have been used for local networking in this context include: twisted wire pair, coaxial cable and fiber optics [2]. The use of a coaxial cable as a passive broadcast channel and contention protocols for multiple access, previously developed for radio and satellite networks [3], were first demonstrated in Ethernet [4]. Since then, many local networks have been proposed or built with all or part of their transmission facilities based upon broadcast coaxial cables. They include CNET [5], the NBS Network [6], MIT's Laboratory for Computer Science Network [2], FordNet [7] and Cablenet [8], among others.

An experimental packet network for local interconnection based upon broadcast coaxial cables is currently under development at the Department of Computer Sciences of the University of Texas at Austin: the Texas Experimental Network (TENET). The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the TENET architecture.

The TENET architecture has been defined with the following characteristics in mind: flexibility, reliability, incremental growth capability and upward compatibility.

Flexibility is an important characteristic because TENET is primarily intended to be an experimental tool for research on communication protocols. It is thus desirable to have an architecture that can accommodate a wide range of network implementation alternatives suitable for the handling of a variety of traffic environments. Towards this goal, one of our research efforts is to apply a hierarchical model for the specification of communication protocol functional layers, with rigorously defined interfaces between layers. This approach will facilitate the experimentation of different implementation algorithms within individual functional layers for investigating their performance characteristics under different traffic conditions.

The types of data traffic that we envision in the local network environments of interest include: interactive computing on time-sharing systems, RJE systems, business systems involving transaction processing and word processing, as well as personal computer systems which use the local network for access to central file systems on mass storage and special processors. (A notable exception here is packetized voice.) With these applications in mind, a key network performance objective is to be capable of handling relatively long data messages for efficient file transfers, in addition to providing a small network delay for short messages and high priority traffic.

Compared to remote networking using common-carrier facilities, a coaxial cable local network has certain characteristics that impact the design of network protocols. First, the transmission speed is significantly higher than common-carrier facilities (500 Kbps using the Zilog SIO chip in a TENET coaxial cable interface; several Mbps can be accomplished with a custom designed interface [4].) Second, the bit error rate of a coaxial cable of about one kilometer in length is considerably lower than that of conventional common-carrier facilities.

The above network design objectives and coaxial cable transmission characteristics are the motivation behind the provision of several special features in the TENET architecture to be described later: (1) a priority mechanism and a pre-emption mechanism in the coaxial cable multiple access protocol; (2) packet repeaters which provide buffering, routing and header switching functions.

2. NETWORK TOPOLOGY

A network implementing the TENET architecture may consist of a single coaxial cable or many coaxial cable subnetworks. Packet repeaters serve as switching nodes that buffer and route packets from one subnetwork to another. The number of subnetworks that can be connected to a single packet repeater is implementation dependent. The network topology of interconnected coaxial cables is not otherwise restricted. In general, either a tree or mesh topology may be implemented. An example of a mesh topology is shown in Figure 1. The architecture of interconnected broadcast subnetworks has been considered before for several networks [2, 4, 9].

The TENET architecture differs from these networks mainly in a much expanded functional role for the packet repeaters.

Two important functions of (unbuffered) packet repeaters were first discussed by Metcalfe and Boggs [4]. First, since the length of a broadcast cable is limited due to power limitation of transceivers packet repeaters serve to extend the range of a local network. Second, packet repeaters serve as "filters" that localize traffic within a subnetowrk: only traffic intended for another subnetwork will be picked up and retransmitted by a repeater.

The provision for a mesh network topology (with parallel paths between node pairs) in the TENET architecture necessitates packet repeaters which are buffered and are capable of implementing a routing function. We note that since packet repeaters are probably more prone to failure than the passive coaxial cables, it is not clear whether a mesh topology is more reliable than a single cable interconnecting all users. But as we said earlier, the length of a single cable is limited and packet repeaters are necessary for local networks covering a wider area than the maximum length of a single cable. Compared with a tree or dendritic topology (such as those of Ethernet [4] and Cablenet [8]) a mesh topology is much more reliable.

When the pattern of traffic among network nodes has a lot of "locality," the filtering function of repeaters enables the network to carry much more traffic than a single broadcast cable. However, those packets that need to go to a remote subnetwork suffer more delay (several hops are required instead of a single hop from source to destination). To alleviate this problem the provision of an optional header switching function in packet repeaters is included in the TENET architecture (see Section 3.2 for description).

Given a local network and a set of users, there are several ways to partition network nodes into subnetworks. Such partitioning can be done according to the geography of nodes, e.g., all nodes in a single building connect to a single coaxial cable. Alternatively, network nodes may be partitioned according to function, for examples: (1) all nodes belonging to a time-sharing system; (2) all nodes accessing a database system; (3) all work stations of a word processing system. A functional partitioning will probably give rise to a higher degree of locality in the network traffic pattern.

3. SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

There are three major communication protocol layers in the TENET architecture: data link control, network control, and end-to-end control. The data link control protocol layer is concerned with communication between two nodes or a node and a repeater connected to the same cable. The network control protocol layer is concerned with communication between a source node and a destination node in different subnetworks. The end-to-end control protocol layer is concerned with communication between logical entities called sockets in the source and destination nodes.

Two types of packets are distinguished: (1) intranet packets sent by a source node to a destination node within the same subnet, and (2) internet packets sent by a source node to a destination node in a different subnet. The format of an internet packet is shown in Figure 2. In intranet packets, the network control header is absent; otherwise the intranet packet format is the same. (A more detailed description of the packet formats and communication protocol layers is given in [10].)

We shall next describe data link control functions for individual subnetworks in Section 3.1 and then network control functions involving packet repeaters in Sections 3.2.

3.1 COAXIAL CABLE SUBNETWORK

Each subnetwork consists of a coaxial cable and a propulation of nodes and repeaters. Each node or repeater connects to the cable via a cable interface (consisting of a tap and a transceiver). For our discussions in this section, we shall view the cable as a broadcast channel shared by a population of users (nodes and repeaters alike). A packet transmitted by a user in the broadcast channel with no interference from others is received by all users and accepted by the intended receiver whose address is indicated in the packet header.

There are two key problems to be handled at the data link control level: multiple access, and scheduling. Suppose there are altogether N users. The multiple access problem is as follows: (a) among the N users, identify those with data who desire access to the channel, the <u>ready users</u>, and (b) assign channel access to exactly one of the ready users if at least one exists. If two or more ready users are present, then the scheduling problem is: which one of the ready users should be given channel access next, in accordance with the system performance objectives.

A difficulty in the design of multiple access and scheduling protocols is that the broadcast channel itself is the only means of communication for coordinating the distributed users. Most coaxial cable networks, including TENET, provide two basic mechanisms, namely carrier sensing and collision detection, for coordinating users in multiple access protocols.

A carrier sensing mechanism enables a user to detect the presence of an ongoing transmission in the broadcast channel. A carrier-sense protocol dictates that a user must not transmit when the channel is sensed to be busy. (The effectiveness of a carrier-sense protocol increases as the maximum channel propagation delay τ between any 2 users decreases. Carrier sensing is effective here because for a cable of, say, 1 Km operating at 500 Kbps, τ is about 3-4 bit times.)

In TENET, as in most other cable networks, the transceiver in a cable interface can transmit an input signal onto the cable and receive an output signal from the cable simultaneously. Thus when a collision occurs, the collision condition can be detected quickly by each of the transmitters involved; each such transmitter is required to terminate its transmission immediately.

The mechanisms of carrier sensing and collision detection provide the synchronization functions for implementing a variety of multiple access protocols based upon 3 basic multiple access strategies: contention, linear search and tree search. A comparison of these strategies is given in [11] for two extreme traffic conditions: 1 out of the N users in the subnet is ready (condition 1); all N users are ready (condition 2). It is shown that under traffic condition 1, a linear search strategy is much worse than the contention and tree search strategies when N is large. The reverse is true under traffic condition 2. Furthermore, analysis results in [11] show that traffic condition 1 prevails a great deal of the time even when the channel utilization is moderately high, thus favoring contention and tree search strategies when N is large. On the other hand, when N is small, a linear search strategy is desirable because it does not require adaptive control needed for both contention and tree search strategies.

We mentioned that flexibility is a desirable characteristic for the TENET architecture so that it can accommodate a wide range of implementation alternatives for the handling of a variety of traffic environments (or an environment that is not well defined at the time of network construction). For example, the number of users may be large in some subnets and small in some others. A scheduling algorithm more sophisticated than what has been described is desired to handle large packets for applications requiring file transfers as well as to ensure good delay performance for special classes of traffic.

Two additional mechanisms are provided in the TENET architecture for multiple access and scheduling:

(i) A priority mechanism

Packets are differentiated into priority classes numbered 1, 2, ..., P with 1 denoting the highest priority and P denoting the lowest priority. (The TENET architecture allows up to 8 different priority classes.) A <u>deference period</u> of T_p seconds is associated with priority class p, and

$$0 = T_1 \le T_2 \le \cdots \le T_P$$

(In order for the priority mechanism to effectively discriminate class p and class p+1 packets, it is necessary to have

$$T_{p+1} - T_p > 3\tau$$

where the users are not assumed to be time synchronized.)

At the beginning of an assignment period (which is initiated when a user has just detected the channel changing from a busy to an idle condition and terminated by a successful transmission) the following algorithm is executed by a ready user with a class p packet to send:

1. Wait for T_p seconds;
2. <u>If</u> the channel has been detected to be busy at any time during the T_p period <u>then</u> do nothing until the next assignment period <u>else</u> transmit immediately;
3. <u>If</u> collision is detected <u>then</u> retry according to a contention protocol.

The contention protocol in step 3 above may be either a slotted protocol (retry with probability p in the next time slot) or an unslotted protocol (retry after a random delay).

Note that the above protocol is a flexible combination of the linear search and contention strategies. The protocol divides ready users with packets to send into different groups. The strategy in general is to perform a linear search over the groups (according to a priority ordering). Once a group is identified as containing ready users, a contention protocol is then used to assign channel access to one of these users.

Consider two special cases. Suppose there are N priority classes with only one user in each class, then the protocol becomes a linear search protocol (according to a prioritized ordering). On the other hand, if only one priority class is implemented, the protocol becomes a pure contention protocol.

The priority assigned to a packet may depend upon many factors. It may be determined at the source who pays for a certain class of service. It may depend upon the packet length, e.g., short packets have higher priority than long ones. It may depend upon the packet type (data versus control).

The priority mechanism defined above has been independently proposed and studied by F. Tobagi of Stanford University [12]. It has also come to our attention recently that it is similar to the idea of acknowledging Ethernet [13].

(ii) A pre-emption mechanism

The carrier-sense protocol dictates that each user must defer to any transmission currently in progress in the channel. However, in order to accommodate the transmission of very long packets and still provide short delays for short packets and urgent traffic, the TENET architecture provides for a preemption mechanism. There is a pre-emption bit in the header of each packet, which when turned on indicates that the packet may be pre-empted. A ready user with a high priority packet may deliberately generate a collision in the middle of the transmission of a packet with the pre-emption bit turned on. The transmitter of the pre-empted packet aborts its transmission upon detection of the collision and an assignment period is initiated.

The preemption mechanism may also be used by a packet repeater to implement a congestion control algorithm. If a packet repeater cannot accept a new input packet addressed to it due to its input buffer limit having been reached (see below), it can use the pre-emption mechanism to stop the packet transmission and then send a high priority control message to the pre-empted user to inform him of its condition.

3.2 PACKET REPEATERS

A packet repeater is connected to two or more broadcast cables. They act as switching nodes and their main functions are the buffering and routing of packets. A significant departure from other packet networks in the TENET architecture is that packet repeaters are not required to do error control at the data link control level (error detection will still be done). There are two reasons for it. First, the bit error rate of a coaxial cable is expected to be quite low. Second, at the relatively high transmission speed of a coaxial cable, buffering at repeaters is expected to be in short supply. This is especially true since one of the network functional objectives is to be able to handle long data packets for applications requiring file transfers.

Header Switching

A consequence of the decision of not doing error control at repeaters, is the new option of performing header switching. As soon as the data link control and network control portions of the header of a packet have been received, a repeater can immediately make a routing decision and retransmit the packet onto another broadcast cable before the packet has been completely received. Header switching when applied under favorable traffic conditions can reduce significantly the source to destination delay of a packet requiring multiple hops; at the same time it will also reduce the buffering capacity required in repeaters. Header switching is similar to the virtual cut-through switching technique analyzed by Kermani for packet networks using point-to-point links [14].

Routing

The TENET architecture defines a general form of source routing. A variety of adaptive or non-adaptive routing algorithms may be implemented. Each packet contains a route number which is set initially by the source node. At a repeater, the next subnet to forward a packet to is determined by a table look-up procedure, using the destination subnet address and the route number in the packet header. There is also an adaptive routing bit in the packet header, which if turned on by the source, authorizes repeaters to change the route number of the packet if the next ongoing subnet of the original route is congested. The construction of efficient routing table data structures as well as update procedures are research problems currently being investigated by us.

Buffer Management and Congestion Control

Packets may be treated differently by repeaters depending upon two criteria. First, each packet has a priority class specified by its source node, as described earlier. In general, the length of packets with high priority classifications is limited to 256 bytes. The length of packets with low priority classifications can be much longer (up to 2^{16} bytes). Note that a low priority packet may be longer than the available buffer space of a repeater and can only be handled by means of the header switching option.

Second, the number of hops (subnetworks) traversed by a packet is indicated in a hop count field in its header. A repeater accepts or rejects an incoming packet depending upon its buffer space availability, and the priority and hop count of the packet. Specifically, the mechanism of input buffer limits [15] may be used for controlling the input of new packets into the network, by making use of the pre-emption mechanism described earlier.

Finally repeaters are also responsible for throwing away very old packets i.e. packets that have a very large hop count.

Comparison With Other Local Networks

Our switching nodes are termed packet repeaters following the terminology of the packet radio network (PRNET)[16]. Packet repeaters in PRNET are different from ours in two respects: they have the error control function but not the header switching option. Ethernet also has packet repeaters which are unbuffered. Ethernet's repeaters have only the address recognition function and act as pure packet filters.

Both Ford Aerospace Corporation [9] and MIT's Laboratory for Computer Science [2] are developing local networks that provide for the interconnection of subnetworks in a mesh topology. Ford Aerospace Corporation is concerned with interconnecting autonomous local networks using gateways and internetworking protocols. The subnetwork concept as discussed by Clark et al. [2] is very similar to ours, except for one architectural difference. In their discussion, a "bridge" is used to connect two subnetworks, whereas in the TENET architecture, each repeater can connect more than two broadcast cables and provide a routing function not unlike that of PRNET packet repeaters and ARPANET IMPS [1].

4. CONCLUSION

TENET is an experimental packet network currently under development at the Department of Computer Sciences of the University of Texas at Austin. It is primarily intended to be a test-bed for trying out research ideas on communication protocols and network control algorithms. A characteristic of the TENET architecture (that we strive for throughout its definition) is the ability to accommodate a wide range of implementation alternatives. Special features of the arthitecture include: a priority and a pre-emption mechanism for multiple access and scheduling in broadcast subnets, as well as routing and header switching functions in packet repeaters.

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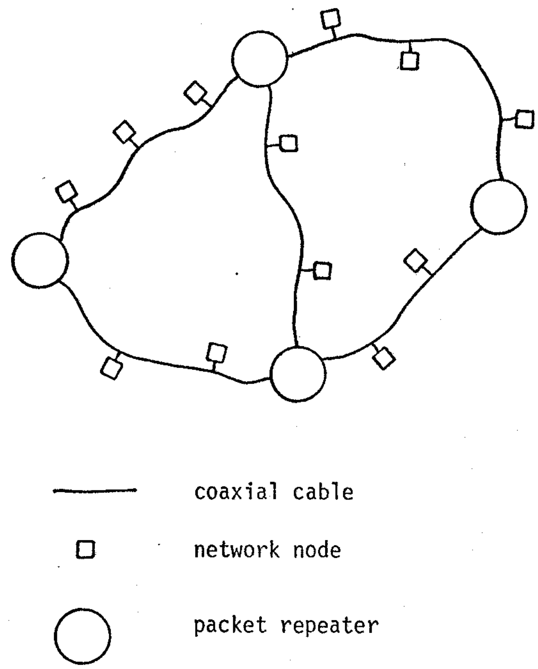

Figure 1. An example of a mesh network topology

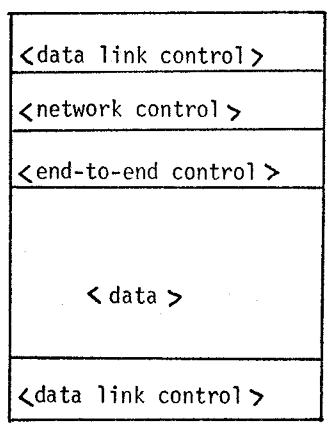

Figure 2. Format of an internet packet